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The Prince of This World

Michael Murphy

Loyola University Chicago, mmurphy23@luc.edu

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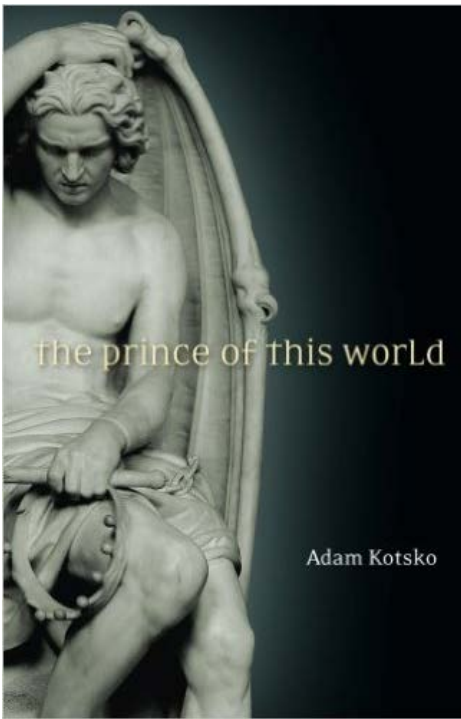


Adam Kotsko

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Review

While the “guiding question” of Adam Kotsko’s *The Prince of this World* is the “problem of evil” (110), his purpose in this well-organized and highly accessible text is more of an archaeological dig into the “subterranean legacy” of the devil than it is a systematic phenomenology of the diabolical. At turns theological, anthropological, and historical, Kotsko’s rich interdisciplinary study is best described as a work in political theology, “a genealogical investigation that aims to expose the unexpected theological roots of modern political concepts” (164). While some readers will quibble with “unexpected,” Kotsko’s study is a welcome and eye-opening account of both the devils that we know and devils



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that we don't.

Kotsko tracks the devil largely through series of paradigms, distilled in two helpful charts, and putting into practice the genealogical method to a constructive (if occasionally too tidy) end. His paradigmatic distillations—Deuteronomistic, Prophetic, Apocalyptic, Patristic, and Monastic—are profoundly useful as interpretive lenses that have developed over time and provide a clear historical frame. It is the Apocalyptic paradigm, with its emphases on history, crisis, and suffering, that emerges as crucial in the argument—specifically as a check against Kotsko's occasional gnostic-seeming tendency to rationalize and disincarnate evil. By laying waste to the classic presumption that rulers (pharaohs, kings, ecclesiastical potentates) and their webs of political agency are not so much cosmically aligned with God—as the conventional narrative goes—but rather ordered to a “continued companionship with the devil” (198). The devil, as prince of this world, reveals worldly power not as benevolent and communitarian but as historical “dynamics of demonization” where humanity still has “providence as its guide,” yet also must make a kind of Miltonian “amity” with the “cultural baggage” of evil, the “devilish supplement” that governs the world. The task of the reader, as Kotsko describes so well in his introduction, is to come to grips with this central fact so as to rescue ourselves from false dualisms, beginning—it is fitting—in the very act of reading (and writing) the world: “in short, one must learn to read texts as strategies, as interventions in a power struggle; it means accepting, with [Michel] Foucault, that knowledge is not separate from power or even a mere tool of power but a form of power—and a particularly powerful one at that” (11).

While the texts and figures Kotsko employs to construct his theories are, at times, self-consciously “idiosyncratic”—from Peter of Poitiers to Carole Pateman to Alexander Weheliye—he intersperses these welcome sources with more canonical voices—most of them sponsored by the letter “A” (Antony, Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas)—and Giorgio Agamben, whose insights on the structural phenomena of sovereignty and the unveiling of the locations of power are well-integrated here. The entrenched presumptions of goodness and redemption fall apart precisely given that, in this descriptive work of

archaeology, Kotsko's intellectual realism is set free to provide a missing narrative. Still, Kotsko concludes his monograph with a section called "Notes Towards a New Paradigm." The text, while original in its contribution to "devil studies"—a goal Kotsko eschews in his introduction—is not as constructive theologically as it might be. There are forays into "ransom theories" of salvation and references to classic taxonomies of atonement, but there really isn't much in the way of soteriology or eschatology. As a work of political theology, this is to be expected and its lessened emphasis on normative theology does not detract from Kotsko's highly original project.

Central to Kotsko's text is the construction of a narrative that "has always been hiding in plain sight," namely that the devil—as prince of this world—exists as a kind of floating signifier throughout the history of the West. As Kotsko muses, "Who would have predicted ... that reflections on the relationship between Israel and its God could have produced the conceptual space for something like the devil?" Or that the "Christian God would increasingly take on the characteristics of his cosmic opponent?" (109). In Part 1—"Genealogy of the Devil"—Kotsko traces these various "displacements" in his study, asserting that the devil, ever an eager tourist, shifted locations depending on the shape and character of historical forces. In Hebrew biblical history, the devil is expressed more politically than anything else, hosted most representatively by Rameses II or by kings such as Antiochus Epiphanes, a nefarious ruler who emerged after Alexander the Great's death. Under Tiberius Caesar, the devil was alive in the reprehensible Roman state and deployed his minions by colonizing places such as Palestine, and subjugating its inhabitants to the point where a political messiah is prayed for—and was expected to appear—at any moment. The mediaeval devil was a master of othering and was transmuted upon Jews and witches (women) as a species of scapegoating and political exclusion. Perhaps given the force of Christian unity exemplified by the mediaeval synthesis—or the rise of political liberty during that era—the situation seemed salvageable by mediaeval thinkers such as Gregory of Nyssa who thought that the "devil could be redeemed—precisely by being deprived of his despotic power" (204). But no such luck. The devil, as in Cormac's McCarthy's character Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* (Random House, 1985), dances his diabolical machinations from the very seat of human power: "He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (335).

In Part 2 of the text—"Life of the Devil"—Kotsko is in full stride with his project in political theology. Keeping the seminal Karl Schmitt's dictum that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" front and center, Kotsko provides an analysis of post-religious secularism, and those who have written the demonic off merely as titillating folklore. His conclusion, following Schmitt, Foucault, and Friedrich Nietzsche, is that "modern" life is no less assailed by migrations and expressions of the unholy than the lives of our historical forbears were. In the secular West, where rationality, freedom, and self-determination are prized—and clung to so precariously, day by day—the devil occupies what seems to be new territory: the very political systems that were so hard won and which were supposed to render us free from retrograde phantasms and the "demons" that exist only in the corners of the mind. Under the conditions of late modern capitalism, human freedom in its preference for the material over the transcendent, "collapses into an endlessly tautologous justification of the way things are" (200). In this way, the twenty-first century devil exists not only more subtly but also in a tighter circuit.

This devil sprouts from the terrain of diminished understandings of autonomy and community, or what Kotsko calls “the Trap of Freedom.” Between the soulless monolith of the state and the feral power of markets it’s clear that the “modern apparatus” of freedom exists; but freedom in itself becomes the devil’s handmaiden as its unbridled desire tends to cultivate cultures that are “disordered and violent.”

For this reader, it is neoliberal freedom that becomes the most pregnant elephant in the room. And, while Kotsko does not lean on neoliberalism as a keystone in his genealogy—favoring “modern” instead, which is too imprecise—the subordination of autonomy and agency to concentrated, unaccountable, and increasingly privatized power structures that perform neoliberalism becomes what Kotsko calls our “demonic heritage” (206). And this is where the devil lives today. Like the demonic spirit that shapes it, our “modern Western tradition under present-day democratic capitalism” is less a Whiggish march to a utopian goal or a pilgrimage of peace and progress, but rather remains, as ever, “an apparatus for generating blameworthiness” (199). To discern the legacy of the devil, one need look no further than to the fruits of the age: capitalism, war mongering, racialization, and territorialism. These are fields in which the devil runs free, succoring his enterprises and anchoring his empires.

According to Kotsko, this should come as no surprise. The devil’s visitations have been multivalent in the course of history and we should not be shocked by the reach of his wily creativity. The devil is, as ever, the prince of this world, and he will have his seat at the table. The central idea of his truly excellent study—that the devil exists and persists in a living gallery of secularized forms—is a highly engaging exercise in political theology and deserves a wide readership.

About the Reviewer(s):

Michael P. Murphy is director of the Catholic Studies minor and associate director of the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola University Chicago.

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About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Adam Kotsko is Assistant Professor of Humanities at Shimer College in Chicago. His books include *Why We Love Sociopaths* (2012) and *Politics of Redemption* (2010).

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